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ABSTRACT

Research on changing attitudes toward parenthood among college students was expanded to include a study of textbooks to determine if they were reflective of the changes. A sample of 980 undergraduate female home economics students in four universities in the Midwest and West Coast areas were involved in this decade retesting of Maxwell and Montgomery's 1969 study. The results of the Timing of Parenthood Study indicated a much greater desire to delay parenthood than had been indicated by the sample in the 1969 study. Marriage and family textbooks, the primary resource commonly used in a family life course, have historically repeated the belief that children are a natural extension of marriage. Increasingly, parenthood based on choice has been introduced into the textbooks, although the implicit message is that parenthood is the better decision. Another source of parenthood encouragement could be the textbooks' theoretical orientation, such as approaching the study of marriage and family from the family life cycle perspective. An implication derived from the research was that the three adult roles--work, marriage, and parenthood--must be integrated into a comprehensive family life education program, if the educator desires to approach program planning and curriculum development consistent with trends projected for the 1980s. (YLB)

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Home Economics Student's Attitudes Toward Parenthood: Implications for Curriculum Development in the 1980s

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There are three major roles whereby adulthood is confirmed in America society: work, marriage and parenthood. For many years it has been suggested that making the specific choices and gaining the necessary preparation relative to assuming these roles constituted the salient developmental tasks of adolescence and young adulthood (Havighurst, 1949; 1972). This assumption has guided family life educators in the development of programs in which the course content and pedagogy reflected the decision-making process as well as the preparation necessary to assume the roles once the choices were made.

Historically, choosing and preparing to assume work roles was the primary focus of young males, whereas females in this age bracket were more likely to concentrate on those roles associated with marriage and parenthood. A considerable shift in this regard has been experienced by the youth in American society over the past 10 to 20 years so that at present both women and men view their choice of occupation and the preparation for its assumption to be a primary concern. Adjunct to this more egalitarian viewpoint toward adult work roles is the belief that increasingly both marital and parenting roles are within the province of "choice" rather than being roles which either males or females are "compelled" to assume (Knox, 1980). In addition, it has been suggested that although most women and men will "choose" to marry and participate in parenthood, these roles will be assumed at a later age (Bernard, 1974; Knaub, Eversoll and Voss, 1980). It seems reasonable to conclude that such sweeping attitudinal and behavioral change must affect family life curriculum in both content and approach well into the 1980s and beyond.

Timing of Parenthood Study

As family life educators we became interested in what we perceived to be changing attitudes toward parenthood among the college students in our marriage and parenting classes. Subsequently, a research project was developed to investigate the nature of this attitudinal pattern. This project was designed as a decade retesting of Maxwell and Montgomery's original 1969 study. Our sample consisted of undergraduate, female, home economics students enrolled in four universities located in the midwest and west coast areas. A total population of 980 students responded to the Timing for Parenthood Scale developed by Maxwell and Montgomery (1969). The respondents were primarly between the ages of 18-23 (92.1%), unmarried (88.1%), without children (95%) and from intact (89.9%), middle-class families (based on the Hollingshead Two-Factor Index of Social Position). Forty-five percent of the mothers of the subjects were full-time homemakers with the remaining 54% employed full- or part-time outside the home. With reference to the size of their family of orientation, 49% were from families of three or fewer children and 51% were from families of four or more children.

The results of the current Timing of Parenthood Study indicated a much greater desire to delay parenthood than had been indicated by the sample of college females in the 1969 study. As an example, one of the questionnaire items stated: "The best time to begin having children is usually within the first two years of marriage." The results of the 1981 study revealed that 82.1 percent of the sample disagreed with the statement compared with

38 percent in the 1969 study. A changed pattern of response was evident throughout the data (See Table 1). This change was not in the pronatal attitude per se (for it was clear that most, 94.6%, expected to be parents), but in the complex of variables related to that attitude, i.e., the effect on the marital relationship or the fulfillment for the wife and husband culminating in an impact on the timing for parenthood.

Table 1 about here

From the perspective of family life educators, we became curious as to the source of the attitudinal shift. This led us to question whether the content of marriage and family textbooks, as the primary resource commonly used in a course, was consistent with the change toward "greater delay" evidenced by the students likely to be reading these materials. In other words, we had evidence that student's attitudes toward parenthood were changing, but the question which remained was: "Were the textbooks reflective of these changes?"

Textbooks

Maxwell and Montgomery (1969) observed that, "Much of the information in marriage courses is not based on research" (p. 341) and outlined the following as being the prevalent beliefs concerning parenthood held by many people, but not substant ated by research:

1. couples have a greater obligation to children than to themselves
2. children strengthen the marital relationship
3. children are essential to a woman's sense of fulfillment and well being
4. children are an indispensable expression of marital love, and
5. a minimum parent-child age differential is preferable.

The collegiate samples in Maxwell and Montgomery's (1969) study and in the Knaub, Eversoll, and Voss (1980) study indicated a continuing shift away from these commonly held beliefs. In fact, the results of the present study indicated that contrary positions are in evidence, that is, parenthood and marriage are enhanced by the postponment of children during at least the first two years of marriage or longer and that children are not a necessary element for a fulfilling life.

Historically, the belief that children are a natural extension of marriage appears repeatedly in marriage and family textbooks. For example:

> The achievement of a deep and abiding love between a husband and wife normally results in the growing desire to share, as well as to perpetuate their happiness. The natural way to do this is by raising a family of happy, intelligent, emotionally mature children. The result is probably life's superlative satisfaction (Magoun, 1956, p. 351).

> Many emotional satisfactions are enjoyed in parenthood which could not be possible in any other way. Not only do children represent a continuation of life into the future they enrich the present in a way nothing else can (Womble, 1966, p. 443).

> Those mature enough to be ready for marriage are usually mature enough two years later for parenthood. One sign of readiness is wanting to have children. The desire for children is almost universal, but not quite. Some women don't want to be bothered (Blood, 1969, p. 419).
>
> The birth of the first child is a high point in marriage... It expresses in visible new life the strength and vitality of the invisible bond of love between husband and wife. Especially for a woman, the coming of a child has great significance. It is a confirmation of her womanhood, a fulfillment of the unique role she alone can perform (Kelley, 1974, p. 473).
>
> By common understanding, children make a family. A young couple very often hesitates to call themselves a family until children are born; indeed, some young couples do not really feel themselves to be married until they have children (Schultz and Rodgers, 1975, p. 269).
>
> But it is important to realize that even though the husband-wife bond may be weakened by the addition of children in some cases, the overall stability of the family is likely to be strengthened (Broderick, 1979, p. 316).
>
> Being parents has many rewards and pleasures. For some persons, to live alone--even with a loving mate--is unthinkable. They want children as a creative expression of themselves (Rice, 1979, p. 557).
>
> Parenthood remains one of the major functions of marriage. Despite decreasing emphasis on it and more tolerance of childlessness for married couples, the vast majority of married couples will become parents (Cox, 1981).

Students reading materials such as are represented by these examples are undoubtedly being guided to the conclusion that not choosing parenthood is certainly an unorthodox and perhaps a psychologically unhealthy choice to make. When statements such as "Some women don't want to be bothered" (Blood, 1969, p. 419) are introjected into the dialogue about parenthood, it seems to devalue both choices--to be a parent and not to be a parent. One choice is a "bother" and the other sounds very suspect or selfish, as one

is choosing not to be "bothered" by something that probably represents ". . . life's superlative satisfaction" (Magoun, 1956, p. 351) and the ". . . strongest motive for marriage" (Rice, 1978, p. 8).

Increasingly, parenthood based on "choice" is being introduced into marriage and family textbooks. As an illustration, Scanzoni & Scanzoni (1981), using exchange theory, devote a whole chapter to the costs and rewards of both parenthood and nonparenthood. The authors frame the decision-making process via the following questions. . . "Assuming they are physically able to have children, will a particular husband and wife want to have them? If so, how many and when?" (p. 505). On the other hand, the undocumented, implicit message that parenthood is the better decision continues to be present in marriage textbooks. For example, Rice (1979) states that . . . "this over-emphasis on motherhood is not only disadvantageous to women but to children as well" (p. 229), but later concludes that . . . "being parents will always be more popular than not being parents" (p. 616). Although these passages appear in different sections of the book, it seems clear that if one is to be part of the mainstream of American life one will be a parent. Similarly, Cox (1978) suggests that couples should have the option of choosing parenthood, but that having children is a highly rewarding adventure. He does seem to support a "choice" position in that he suggests. . . "although the social expectation to have children still exists, couples are less likely to be thought of as selfish hedonists or infertile if they remain childless" (p. 298). However, he would seem to introduce the fact that the childless state is a less desirable one for most in that . . . "Despite the increasing preference for no children and the emphasis on fertility control, most couples

will want to have one or more children." (p. 298).

Another approach which would seem to introduce potential bias is the use of research quoted from another textbook, perhaps an earlier edition, giving the impression that the research represents a more recent effort than is actually the case. As an example, in the sixth edition of Building a Successful Marriage (Landis & Landis, 1973) under the subtitle, "Why have children?" (p. 441), one of the arguments presented in favor of parenthood is that it contributes to marital happiness. The authors cite as the major support for this position a study by Burgess and Cottrell (1939) in which it was found that . . . "couples who had no children but desired them, and couples who had one or more children because they desire them, were the happiest in marriage. Consequently, whether or not they are successful in having children, they are among the happier couples " (p. 441). This study is quoted in support of parenthood in the Landis and Landis series of marriage textbooks back to 1948. Yet, the study itself was published 42 years ago and the conclusions drawn are questionable given the data provided. However, the young adult reader using these textbooks often does not detect the flaw in research credibility and accepts the printed word as fact.

Another source of parenthood encouragement may be found in the textbook's theoretical orientation. Approaching the study of marriage and the family from the family life cycle perspective, for example, would certainly seem to introduce the expectation of parenthood. As an illustration, in Marriage and Family Development (Duvall, 1977) parenthood as "choice" is seemingly considered in that . . . "Once, children came as a matter of course.

Now modern contraceptives make possible a conscious choice of parenthood and the timing of the child's arrival" (p. 202). Yet, the very concept of the family life cycle assumes the presence of children, therefore precluding a "choice" in the matter. Thus if the reader chooses not to have children the rest of this book becomes irrelevant.

It is apparent that statements concerning parenthood are made in marriage and family texts that are not solidly grounded in research. Pohlman, Thompson, and Gennings (1969) surveyed 17 texts used in marriage and family courses. These authors rated the rationales used, research cited, extensiveness and quality of coverage, and implied advice given to students on the subject of when to have children. The authors concluded that with few exceptions, the topics were handled poorly by the textbooks on all four counts investigated. The task of the objective family life educator, therefore, is to help students critically analyze such statements (whether actual or implied) and sort out "fact" from "opinion." Students also need a skillful facilitator who will aid them in critically examining their own expectation patterns in relationship to the empirical data that do exist.

It should also be stressed that students do not form their parenthood role expectations in a vacuum, separate and apart from other adult role considerations. Rather, the adult roles of occupation, marriage, and parenthood are considered to be an interrelated package by increasing numbers of both women and men (Bernard, 1974; Angrist and Almquist, 1975; Rossi, 1968). As family life educators we must be ever aware of this fact and its important implication on our programs and course content, including the textbooks we use.

Implications for Curriculum in the 80s

The trends projected for the 1980s seem to point directly to the need for integration of occupational, marital and parenthood considerations into an overall life planning approach to family life education. The major trends appear to be:

1. In the occupational area there will be fewer barriers to women, fewer workaholic men, and more androgynous people. The number of dual-worker families will increase with both women and men approaching work as a major source of identity and commitment in their adult lives but within other arenas, namely marriage and parenthood (Knox, 1980).

2. Marriage will continue to be the dominant family life-style choice; however, the age at marriage will continue to increase (Knox, 1980). Continued emphasis will be on an egalitarian approach to marital roles and responsibilities (Knaub, 1975; Bernard, 1974). In conjunction with the increase in age will be greater prevalance of cohabitation (Knox, 1980). The divorce rate will continue to increase as will the rate of remarriage (Knox, 1980 .

3. Parenthood by choice will be the dominant trend (Knaub, Eversoll, Voss, 1980). A greater tolerance for the childfree option is anticipated. Among those who do enter parenthood the approach will be with greater awareness of what the role involves (Knox, 1980; Knaub, Eversoll and Voss, 1980). Fathers will be more involved in childrearing activities and responsibilities (Eversoll, 1979). In addition, the one-child family will become more acceptable, there will be greater emphasis on shared parenthood, and such options as test tube conception will also increase (Knox, 1980).

If the family life educator is to approach program planning and curriculum development consistent with the trends, then one adult role cannot be considered without also exploring the implications for the other, as they are reciprocal in nature. For example, if parenthood and nonparenthood options are to be considered within a course, then the effects that either decision would have must be investigated in terms of its relationship to both marriage and occupational decisions. Likewise, all such considerations must be viewed from both a male and a female perspective as well as

from the perspective of the couple.

Of course, the decision making process is only one consideration necessary in this approach. Taking apart the implications of that decision is another whole issue. For example, if the decision is to choose parenthood, then what of the timing of this event? As Bernard (1971) suggested, there are four major components in the lives of women (and men, too?) which must be considered (marriage, childbearing, professional preparation, and the assumption or resumption of professional practice). In studies of successful women she found the critical variable to be the timing in the break between preparation and career assumption. She concluded that women who married and reared children before their education and professional launching or women who delayed family and children until after they were established in careers were more successful than those who began child-rearing after the completion of their education but before assumption of their professional roles. Data from the present study would seem to indicate a choice in the direction of career first, with a delay parenthood option. Bernard (1971) suggests that the early-interrupted model (education, marriage, children, assumption of career) is associated with lack of success even though it is a prevalent sequencial pattern. Another common pattern among contemporary couples which is emerging as even more common, is the "both men and women can do it all, all at the same time" syndrome--that is, the notion that one can assume a career, marriage and parenthood all at about the same time and be equally successful at each.... if only one tries hard enough. Such a pattern has been associated with role overload which can lead to psychological burnout, guilt and the

possibility of lower success than anticipated in one or all three adult roles (Movius, 1976). As you can see, what we are suggesting is a more comprehensive approach to the subject matter considered within the province of the family life education arena. Such an approach must (1) take into consideration the future dominant role themes and trends in which the students will live out their lives, (2) use a life-planning approach recognizing that decisions must work together and that expectations in one area of adult life will by necessity affect other areas, and will have long lasting impact, and (3) use textbooks and develop materials strongly supported by unbiased research and as free of double messages as possible.

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TABLE 1* Comparison of 1969[a] and 1981[b] Timing for Parental Attitudes by Percent

	Agree		Disagree		Undecided	
	1981	1969	1981	1969	1981	1969
1. The best time to begin having children is usually within the first two years of marriage.	10.3%	55%	82.1%	38%	7.7%	7%
2. It is important for a young couple to enjoy their social life first and to have children later in the marriage.	79.1%	39%	11.3%	52%	9.7%	9%
3. A marriage relationship is strengthened if children are born in the early years of marriage.	6.1%	56%	81.1%	35%	12.9%	9%
4. Women are generally happier if they have children early in their marriage.	7.1%	54%	78.1%	32%	14.8%	14%
5. Men are generally tied closer to the marriage when there are children in the home.	17.8%	77%	65.6%	18%	19.1%	5%
6. Most young married women lack self-fulfillment until they have a child.	9.4%	57%	84.4%	31%	6.2%	11%
7. Young couples who do not have children are usually unable to do so.	3.6%	33%	93.7%	56%	2.8%	11%
8. Married couples who have mature love for each other will be eager to have a child as soon as possible.	7.1%	52%	85.7%	37%	7.3%	11%
9. Couples who do not have children cannot share in the major interests of their friends who are parents and are therefore left out of most social circles.	14.8%	33%	76.0%	59%	7.1%	8%
10. Children enjoy their parents more when the parents are nearer their own age; therefore, parents should have children while they are still young.	19.3%	73%	68.6%	21%	12.1%	6%

*In the table, the percentages strongly agreeing & agreeing, and strongly disagreeing & disagreeing were combined.
a. Maxwell and Montgomery, 1969.
b. Four state sample, Knaub et al., 1981.